

Everything is Illuminated, by Jonathan Safran Foer

reviewed by [Gordon Houser](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

Often we look to find ourselves, to learn from our forebears who we are. If that past--unreliable at best--is unavailable, we may have to use our imaginations to reconstruct it. This is the dilemma Jonathan Safran Foer presents in his stunning debut novel.

A young man, also named Jonathan Safran Foer, travels to the Ukraine to try to find the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis. He brings an old photograph of his grandfather and three others, with these words on the back: "This is me with Augustine, February 21, 1943." Foer's guide and translator in the Ukraine, Sasha, arrives with his own grandfather and their dog, Sammy Davis Junior, Junior. Sasha serves as one of the book's narrators, and his muddled English is one of the novel's hilarious elements.

The narrative structure is complex yet fairly easy to follow. Sasha narrates their search for the woman Augustine and the village of Trachimbrod, the shtetl where Jonathan's grandfather grew up. Interspersed in the text are sections from an imagined history of Trachimbrod that Jonathan writes, as well as letters from Sasha to Jonathan written after Jonathan has returned to the U.S.

Holocaust literature is an attempt to tell a tale that is impossible to tell. The genre includes historical research, powerful memoirs such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*--plus many works of fiction, including last year's *Austerlitz*, by W. G. Sebald.

Foer's approach assumes that "humorous is the only truthful way to tell a sad story," as one of Sasha's letters puts it. Foer uses Sasha's fractured English and some slapstick as the three travelers and the flatulent dog make their car trip, along with numerous fantastical elements in the history of Trachimbrod, to finally get to the illumination of a truth too dark to fully understand, too awful to look at.

Because the history of his ancestors has been destroyed except for the one photograph, Jonathan must manufacture memory through imagination. As he has his great-great-great-great-great-grandmother say, "If there is no love in the world, we will make a new world." Sasha's letters serve as a commentary on Jonathan's emerging story. He points out that "love, in your writing, is the immovability of truth." But later he chastises Jonathan for letting harsh truth override love. He calls Jonathan's relatives cowards because "you are all in the proximity of love, and all disavow love."

Foer is trying to make some kind of sense out of a story that makes no sense. He uses indirection and humor to get at wounds that seem too terrible to mention. And because "there is no God" for the majority of these characters, all that's left is imagination, creating love or truth however one can.

The most tangible hope in the story's illumination is Sasha's decision to face the truth of his father's abuse and break free. Perhaps that is Foer's point. He--and all of us--must break free of those people and forces that want to keep us in chains and in the dark.